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ABSTRACT

In recent years, concern over students dropping out of school has increased. A primary focus is the size of the dropout population, a question that has been addressed in two National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) longitudinal studies. Both studies provide the data needed to consider the dropout experiences between the sophomore and senior years of two groups of students a decade apart in time. Over the 10 years between the 1980-82 High School and Beyond survey (HS&B) and the 1990-92 data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) (follow-ups), there was a 43 percent reduction in the percent of sophomores who dropped out of school. The NELS:88 rate for the sophomore cohort of 1990 is 6.2 percent. Relative rankings for racial and ethnic groups did not change over the decade, and in both cohorts the dropout rates for Hispanics were higher than those for Whites and Asians. Rates for Blacks were between those of Hispanic Americans and Whites. In both periods, failure in school and dislike for school were major factors leading students to drop out of school. Pregnancy and marriage were important factors influencing females' decisions to leave school early. Three figures illustrate the discussion. (SLD)

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

ISSUE BRIEF

Dropping Out of School: 1982 and 1992

AUGUST 1993

Modern societies face an increasing demand for trained workers who can succeed in an ever changing technological workforce. Every time a student leaves school without completing a high school education, the nation runs the risk of adding another unskilled worker to the rolls of the American workforce.

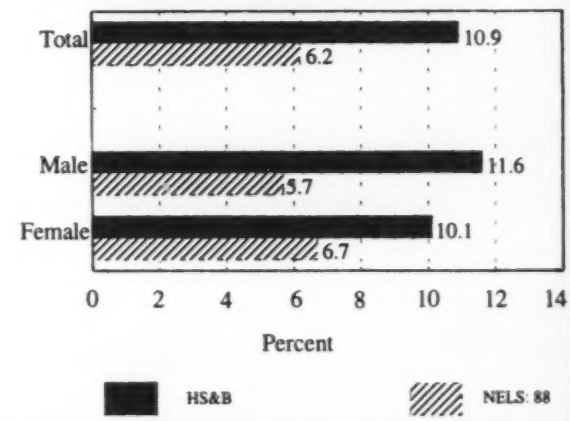
In recent years, concern over problems associated with students dropping out of school has increased. In addition to numerous news and feature articles in the national press, a number of researchers have studied the dropout population, and in 1988 the United States Congress enacted the Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments (P.L. 100–297) mandating an annual dropout report from the National Center for Education Statistics to Congress. The primary focus of all this attention is the size of the dropout population. The question of whether more or fewer students are dropping out of school is asked repeatedly.

Two NCES longitudinal studies provide the data needed to consider the dropout experiences between the sophomore and senior years of two groups of students a decade apart in time.[1] Over the ten year period between 1980–82 and 1990–92, there was a 43 percent reduction in the percent of sophomores who dropped out of high school. By the spring of 1982, 10.9 percent of the sophomores in 1980 had left school without completing high school or its equivalent (figure 1).[2] The comparable NELS:88 rate for the sophomore cohort of 1990 is 6.2 percent.

The 1990–92 dropout rates for males and females were lower than the 1980-82 rates for males and females, and within each study the rates for males and females were not significantly different from one another (figure 1).

The relative rankings of the dropout rates for racial and ethnic groups did not change over the decade (figure 2).[3] In both 1982 and 1992, the dropout rates for Hispanics were higher than those for whites and Asians. And, the rates for blacks fell between those of Hispanics and whites, but were not significantly different from the rates for either group.

Figure 1—HS&B and NELS:88 sophomore cohort dropouts by sex: 1982 and 1992



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, High School and Beyond Study. Sophomore cohort, and National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, Sophomore cohort, Unpublished tabulations, 1982 and 1992.

Consistent patterns emerge when these students are asked why they left school early (figure 3). In 1992, as was the case in 1982, students continue to identify failure in school and dislike for school as major factors leading to dropping out.

Pregnancy and marriage are also important factors influencing female students' decisions to leave school early. In both 1982 and 1992, about one-quarter of the female students reported pregnancy as one of their reasons for dropping out of school. In contrast, in 1982 approximately 35 percent of the female students indicated that marriage was a contributing factor, but by 1992 the percent listing marriage decreased to 20 percent.

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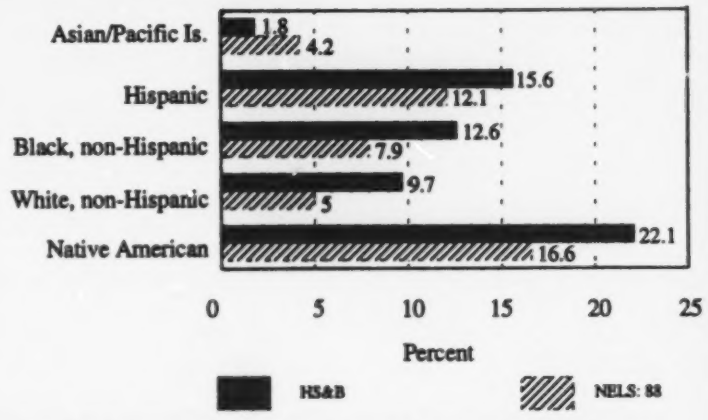
Figure 2—HS&B and NELS:88 sophomore cohort dropouts by race-ethnicity: 1982 and 1992



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, High School and Beyond Study. Sophomore cohort, and National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, Sophomore cohort, Unpublished tabulations, 1982 and 1992.

Although the primary reasons students identify as contributing factors haven't changed very much (with the exception of marriage), the percent of both male and female students leaving school earlier decreased substantially over the decade. Monitoring will continue for the 1990 sophomores, first with an examination of high school transcripts from 1992, and then with another interview in 1994. Analyses of those data as they become available will allow for comparisons of possible changes in the rates at which the dropouts from the 1990–92 group, as compared to the 1980–82 group, return and complete a high school education.

For more information about dropout rates, see:

McMillen, M., Kaufman, P., Germino Hausken, E., & Bradby, D. (1993), Dropout Rates in the United States: 1992. National Center for Education Statistics, NCES 93–464.

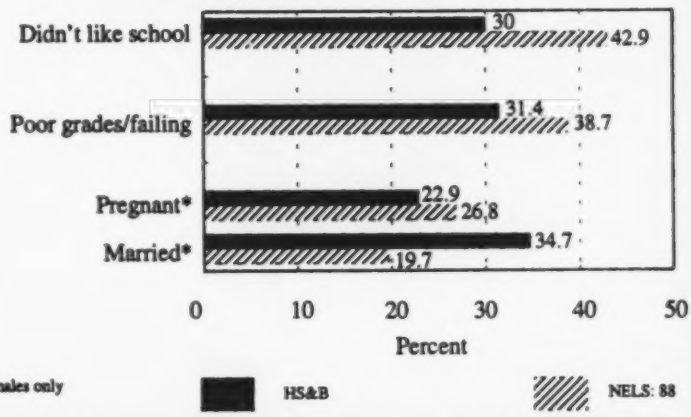
Footnotes:

[1]The HS&B included a nationally representative sample of approximately 30,000 sophomores in 1980 and NELS:88 included a sample of approximately 16,000 sophomores in 1990. In each study, students were interviewed first in the spring of the sophomore year and then were interviewed again two years later.

[2]Previous analyses of HS&B data from the spring 1982 follow-up counted students who had enrolled in alternative programs to prepare for a high school equivalency test or who had completed high school by an alternative means as dropouts (Barro and Kolstad, 1987; Condition of Education, 1986). The analysis presented here treats them as students or completers.

[3]Although each group, except the Asian/Pacific Islanders, appear to have shared in the decline, whites and blacks are the only groups with a statistically significant decline between the two studies.

Figure 3—HS&B and NELS:88 sophomore cohort dropouts who reported that various reasons for dropping out applied to them: 1982 and 1992



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, High School and Beyond Study. Sophomore cohort, and National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, Sophomore cohort, Unpublished tabulations, 1982 and 1992.

Issue Briefs present information on education topics of current interest. All estimates shown are based on samples and are subject to sampling variability. All differences are statistically significant at the .05 level. In the design, conduct, and data process of NCES surveys, efforts are made to minimize the effects of nonsampling errors, such as item nonresponse, measurement error, data processing error, or other systematic error.

This *Issue Brief* was prepared by Marilyn McMillen and Elvie Germino Hausken, NCES, Phil Kaufman, MPR, and Steven Ingels, Katy Dowd, Martin Frankel, and Jiahe Qian, NORC. For further information on this Issue Brief or the U.S. Dropout Rates: 1992, contact the Longitudinal and Household Studies Branch, National Center for Educational Statistics, 555 New Jersey Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20208–5651, (202) 219–1623.

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